# The Jingle Man: Trauma and the Aesthetic

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My title refers to Poe, or more precisely, to Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous put-down of Poe. William Dean Howells, to whom we owe the story, remembers it this way:

> I answered then truly that I knew them only from Poe's criticisms: cruel and spiteful things which I should be ashamed of enjoying as I once did.
>
> "Whose criticisms?" asked Emerson.
> "Poe's," I said again.
> "Oh," he cried out, after a moment, as if he had returned from a far search for my meaning, "*you mean the jingle man*!" (58)

There are two features of this little story that interest me here. The first concerns the way the tag is created: Emerson has been on a "far search for meaning," he has had to rummage around in his memory, and what he comes back with is essentially an onomatopoeia, less a meaning-memory than a sound-memory. Because Poe wrote such jingly poems, it is implied, the very memory of him comes back as itself jingly. Poe sticks in the memory as one who trades more in musical effects than in significant poetic meaning. These musical effects are, moreover, regularly deprecated, defended against. We need only extrapolate from Emerson's phrase and think of the irritating insistence of advertising jingles to grasp something essential about how Poe's reputation has been compromised by his jingliness. Harold Bloom has this jingling insistence in mind when he writes that he can think of no other canonical American writer "at once so inevitable and so dubious" (3). His inevitability, I would say, is precisely what makes him dubious, and this is because his works do not so much "endure," as they "return." Poe's place, we might then say, is less in tradition than in memory, and what keeps coming up out of memory are effects, affects, certain rhythms, a style of musical artifice. F. O. Matthiessen's term for this ensemble of stylistic traits—again, a term of disapprobation—was "factitiousness" (xii).

The other element I would draw attention to is the association—here it is Howells's—with a kind of shameful pleasure. This association is the most powerful motif in all of Poe criticism—veritably a reflex. Listen to Daniel Hoffman, writing about "The Bells," surely the jingliest work by the jingle man: "I had bought that book to own other poems in it—'To Helen' and 'The Raven' and—I confess it—'The Bells.' At fifteen one is ready, one *needs*, to be swept away by the sheer tintinnabulation of a poetry of sound, of incantatory spells, a poetry of hypnagogic trance which will possess one's whole consciousness with a tomtom and a chime" (48). (So entranced is Hoffman by the "incantatory" side of Poe represented by the repetitions of "The Bells," that he titles his book, irritatingly but memorably, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*). Hoffman defends the adolescent "need" to be "swept away" into a "poetry of sound"—though is there another kind?—but Henry James is less taken by the puerile in Poe: he commented that a taste for Poe indicated a "decidedly primitive stage of reflection" (60). And T.S. Eliot is more censorious still: Poe's intellect, he writes, was that of a "highly gifted young person

before puberty. The forms which his lively curiosity takes are those in which a pre-adolescent mentality delights: wonders of nature and of mechanics and of the supernatural, cryptograms and ciphers, puzzles and labyrinths; mechanical chess-players and wild flights of speculation." Eliot condemns Poe's "eccentricity" and "lack of coherence," commenting that "what is lacking is not brain power, but that maturity of intellect which comes only with the maturing of the man as a whole, the development and coordination of his various emotions" (9).

These varied judgments constitute a network that I want to try to think together: on the one hand, a musico-technics, a "factitiousness" indicative of a straining after effect; on the other, a judgment of puerility and immaturity, even "primitivism," a judgment which itself is inevitably shaded by a kind of inadmissible pleasure.

Poe is an anomaly for a certain literary history, and he is anomalous, paradoxically, because he is obsessed with *nomos*, with law and system. Poe's fictions and poetry regularly post themselves at the limit between an inexplicable event or motivation—ignoring the inside-outside distinction, we will call it an "affection"—and that affection's incorporation into, or capture by, a structure of the most rigid systematicity: the Raven's traumatic "Nevermore," for example, is carefully installed and reinstalled in a poetic machine that gives it the meaning it could not otherwise have; similarly, once we accept the anomalous obsession with the old man's eye, or Egaeus's with Berenice's teeth, everything follows of accord: "observe how calmly I can tell you the whole story." James's comment might be more precise than he was often wont to be: to say that a taste for Poe exhibits a "primitive stage of reflection" is to admit that what fascinates in Poe are the rudimentary maneuvers of mastery, the first foldings-in of the outside, the elementary fixations into figure of the unfigurable matrix of the self.

I want to argue that Poe's work is, in this regard, decisively modern. In an essay of some years ago, Jacques Derrida sketched a genealogy of modern aesthetics by attempting to "grasp the unity or invisible harmony" of the two modern concepts of invention: "on the one hand, people invent *stories* (fictional or fabulous), and on the other they invent *machines*, techniques or mechanisms" (32). What kinds of inventions are Poe's? Apparently what disturbs certain people about Poe's work is the absorption of the first notion of invention (*fabula*, *fictio*) by the second (*tekhne*, *methodos*). This collapse of *fabula* into *tekhne* is presumably what Theodor Adorno has in mind when he calls Poe and Baudelaire the "first technocrats of art" (193). Poe's text-machines announce a fall into the order of mechanical reproduction. At the same time, however, a strange affective power clings to these text-machines—resides in them, emerges out of them—and the singularity of the affective seems out of place in the regime of reproducibility erected by the machine. Again, what is both bothersome and memorable about Poe is this conjunction of affect and method, the pathological and the normative.

It is Jean-François Lyotard who, bridging the intellectual traditions of Derrida and Adorno, has provided the best means to understand the exemplary modernity of Poe's work. "Modernity is not a historical period," he writes in his collection, *The Inhuman*, "but a way of shaping a sequence of moments in such a way that it accepts a high rate of contingency" (68). In this view, modernity is

essentially characterized by the refinement and expansion of methods of temporal synthesis. In this regard, the seeking out of the contingent and disruptive—say, through the globalization of a risk-welcoming capitalist enterprise—is simply one half of a process of cosmic complexification whose other aspect is the ever-increasing ability to negate, master, anticipate, or otherwise program the contingent. This process of complexification is not, Lyotard speculates, essentially of the order of human desire (hence his title, *The Inhuman*); we can, of course, moralize the ruthlessness of international capital-expansion—from the times of exploration and colonization to contemporary tele-marketing—as driven by a naked thirst for profit and power, but Lyotard thinks rather that what is at stake is the elaboration of the inhuman life of a techno-scientific ideal, the triumph of the concept: his favored rubric for this is the "Leibnizian monad" that is God—for whom there is no contingency, for whom past and future are equally present, and hence for whom, paradoxically, there is indeed no contingent present whatever, no instant presented in its passing, no "event."

It is in the name of the event, of an ethical posture toward the event (or the "*Is it happening*?" as he sometimes phrases it), that Lyotard articulates his resistance to techno-scientific modernity. And the central category through which Lyotard thinks the event is the aesthetic, and specifically the aesthetics of the sublime and the avant-garde, those experiments with experience aimed at presenting the unpresentable; aimed less, that is, at representing any *thing* than in testifying that there is a beyond of the concept, a beyond of representation, a NOW forever out of reach of capture. But I want to circle back to Poe again by noting an unease in Lyotard's treatment of the avant-gardes: he wishes to say that the experiments with form and its dismantling undertaken by avant-gardes in their attempt to stage an experience of the event can sometimes be confused with mere innovation, confused, that is, with techno-science's ever-expanding search for something new to program:

> A confusion becomes possible, between what is of interest to information and the director, and what is the question of the avant-gardes, between what happens—the new—and the "*Is it happening*?, the *now*. [...] The occurrence, the *Ereignis*, has nothing to do with the *petit frisson*, the cheap thrill, the profitable pathos, that accompanies an innovation. Hidden in the cynicism of innovation is certainly the despair that nothing further will happen. But innovating means to behave as though lots of things happened, and to make them happen. Through innovation, the will affirms its hegemony over time. It thus conforms to the metaphysics of capital, which is a technology of time. The innovation 'works'. The question mark of the *Is it happening*? stops. With occurrence [however], the will is defeated. The avant-gardist task remains that of undoing the presumption of the mind with respect to time. The sublime feeling is the name of this privation. (106-107)

Lyotard says that the event, the occurrence, Heidegger's *Ereignis*, the NOW, has "nothing to do with the *petit frisson*, the cheap thrill," though he recognizes that there is the possibility of the confusion. It seems very unlikely, however, that one could ever definitively distinguish the two. The confusion is only possible, as Lyotard's analysis itself makes clear, because the avant-gardist and the "cynically" innovating aesthetic programmer share an historical situation and dilemma. Seeking out

the new as cheap thrill or profitable pathos, and experimenting with forms to present the unpresentable NOW are two activities that can only finally be distinguished by a moral judgement: the mere "innovator" is "cynical," while the patient avant-gardist is not. The puzzle presented here, let us recall, is just that presented by Poe: is he an avant-gardist or simply an innovator? A man of genius, fit to have his every word translated by the great French avant-gardists Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry; or something closer to Eliot's jejune lover of ciphers and gizmos?

If our judgment of Poe on this question is not to be dogged by the kind of vexed disavowals of shameful pleasure I drew attention to earlier, we need to enlarge the analytic framework beyond simple accounts of human desire or cravenness (just as Lyotard suggested with respect to the analysis of the expansion of capital). We need to do this, not because human desire and morality are not important, but because they are vocabularies or idioms for making sense of—-that is to say, for reducing the complexity of—-precisely the psycho-social interactions we are endeavoring to understand. I propose that we follow up Adorno's friend Walter Benjamin's analysis of modernity as an environment of "shocks," the encounter with which lies at the basis of a certain unhinging of experience and memory, the affective and the cognitive. I suggest, in other words, that we retain Lyotard's focus on the event as what perennially poses the challenge to modernity's temporal synthesis, but rewrite it as trauma, "the encounter with the real"—-as Jacques Lacan calls it—-which is always a missed encounter. For Lacan, the significance of trauma for the psychoanalytic tradition is that it reveals how human desire in its unconscious foundations operates in a zone that is neither quite language nor quite reality, neither meaning nor life, but rather the perennial syncopation between the two. The traumatized individual—-repeating incessantly some encounter with the real that must always be re-missed—-does not operate, in other words, in accord with normal understandings of an adaptive relation between organism and environment: neither pleasure principle, nor reality principle, seems adequate to explain the nature of the human animal's repetitious cycling and recycling, staging and restaging, of an initially incomprehensible shock. It is in this sense that we can say that modernity as trauma can perhaps make visible a drive beyond human morality, beyond the pleasure principle as well as Lyotard's more instrumentalist motifs of will and cynicism. The "encounter with the real" is at once beyond active willing (it's motivated by unconscious drives) and beyond everyday descriptions

of reality: in a telling phrase, Lacan says that "reality is in abeyance, awaiting attention"—"*en souffrance*"—in the psychosocial matrix defined by trauma (55-56).

I confess that I am drawn to rewrite Lyotard's reflections around modernity, time, and the event in terms of trauma also because my subject is Poe, and *his* subject—so often—is trauma. Poe both thematizes and instantiates modernity as trauma, and this is certainly part of his slipperiness. In the essay I referred to earlier, Derrida uncovers an instability in his pursuit of the "invisible harmony" of the two orders of invention: "this instability constitutes that very event—let us say, the work—whose invention disturbs normally, as it were, the norms, the statutes, the rules" (34-35). In this analysis, the "work" is both a text-event and a text-machine, both the place of contingency and the programmed neutralization of contingency. Throughout the essay, Derrida troubles this friable border, the margin between the contingent and the programmatic, between chance and necessity. "Invention," for Derrida, ultimately names a complex and unstable set of operations around this border, operations he describes as "disturbing normally...the norms, the statutes, the rules." The phrase perfectly captures the "disturbance" created by Poe's work, especially his poems: they seem egregious by being so excessively programmed, their very obsession with poetic "norms, statutes, rules" renders them anomalous.

There is no question, for Derrida, of an overturning of the "programmatics of invention," no naive notion that one can stop operating in accord with "homogeneity itself, the law of the same" (56). But while there is no overturning, there is also always a "fabulous complication" (59) within that economy of the same, and he associates this complication with repetition: "The very movement of this fabulous repetition can, through a merging of chance and necessity, produce the new of an event" (59). And this event will be, once again, that "normal disturbance of norms" already described: "This move," he writes, "consists in defying and exhibiting the precarious structure of its rules, even while respecting them, and through the mark of respect that it invents" (60). The inassimilable, the contingent, the aleatory, the new, the "other"—all these only find a home through a paradoxical insistence or emphasis on the programs that reduce them; only come to be through a defiant exhibition of respect for the "rules"—in all their precariousness— governing the operations of the economy of the same. The anomalous always shadows the rigidity of the norm: the inassimilable oddly colors the excessively

factitious.

But how, exactly, are we to grasp in concrete terms such a "contingency," according to such a model? How might we read a text of Poe's, say, as producing such a "fabulous complication" into the encounter with a traumatic modernity? In order to begin to answer this question, I come back to Poe's jingliness, and specifically his late poem, "The Bells." We know the precise circumstances surrounding the composition of "The Bells." Visiting Mary Louise Shew Houghton in Manhattan, Poe announces "I have to write a poem; I have no feeling, no sentiment, no inspiration," and moreover, "I so dislike the sound of bells tonight, I cannot write. I have no subject—I am exhausted" (1: 429). Mrs Houghton did not report why Poe thought he had to write a poem, only that she aided him by picking up a piece of paper, putting a title—"The Bells"— and Poe's name on it, and writing the first lines of several stanzas, which Poe successively completed, after which labor he promptly went to sleep for twelve hours.

The poem's inventiveness would seem to consist precisely in the containment of the contingent and harshly impinging: to return to Derrida's terms, we would have here an example of an invention in which "the aleatory margin [which it seeks] to integrate remains homogeneous with calculation" (55). Some irritating bells, madly ringing, or perhaps only ringing irregularly, will be submitted to a poetic form which will, as it were, ring programmatic changes—both semantic and rhythmic—on this contingent piece of the real: "the bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells." The bells Poe hears at Mary Louise's are real and intrusive in an initially obstructing way—let us characterize them as an historically verifiable instance of modernity as shock.

At this point it may be well to remember the poem itself. I reproduce only the fourth and final movement below.

Hear the tolling of the bells—
Iron bells!
*What* a world of solemn thought their monody compels!
In the silence of the night
How we shiver with affright
At the melancholy meaning of the tone!
For every sound that floats
From the rust within their throats
Is a groan.
And the people—ah, the people
They that dwell up in the steeple
All alone,

And who, tolling, tolling, tolling,
In that muffled monotone,
Feel a glory in so rolling
On the human heart a stone—
They are neither man nor woman—
They are neither brute nor human,
They are Ghouls:—
And their king it is who tolls:—
And he rolls, rolls, rolls, rolls
A Paean from the bells!
And his merry bosom swells
With the Paean of the bells!
And he dances and he yells;
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the Paean of the bells—
Of the bells:—
Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the throbbing of the bells—
Of the bells, bells, bells—
To the sobbing of the bells:—
Keeping time, time, time,
As he knells, knells, knells,
In a happy Runic rhyme,
To the rolling of the bells—
Of the bells, bells, bells:—
To the tolling of the bells—
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—
To the moaning and the groaning of the bells. (1: 437-8)

It is difficult to know whether repetition is the method or the theme of this extraordinary poem. The semantic organization into four parts—moving from the tinkling of the silver bells to the tolling of the iron bells—certainly conforms to Poe's lugubrious obsessions. But I would remark the accretive, additive nature of the poem: the repetitions get more insistent and numerous as the poem progresses, and recycle more rapidly in both smaller and larger units. If we continue to read the poem as a kind of programming of the contingent and impinging margin, we have to consider some complications to this notion: either the normalization of the insistent bells is not proceeding that well, since it appears to get only *more* necessary as the poem proceeds; or, the programming is going fine, but is less a troublesome chore than a kind of intense *pleasure*, to be renewed and extended as long as possible. It is certainly the case here, as it also is in "The Raven," that the semantic drift of the poem and its rhythmic energies seem at odds: for as we move toward the darkening close of the funereal "iron bells," the poem's repetitions become more and more agitated, even ecstatic. That pleasure is being had here in this ever-escalating battle between the sheerest repetition and its containment in at least minimal scansions, seems almost inadvertently confessed when, amidst the "sobbing of the bells" of the final lines we hear of a "happy Runic rhyme." But this pleasure, we can suspect, is of the kind that interests Lacan—beyond a regulating pleasure, that is, exceeding the distinction between pleasure

and pain.

We have here, I would argue, an instance of the trauma of modernity, in which an initially obstructing or impinging shock—here the bells ringing and obstructing Poe's poetic impulse—comes to feed the very work it seems to obstruct, which work returns repetitiously and compulsively to its "obstructing occasion." Programming—here the poetic text—compulsively re-programs and iterates its encounter with its contingent outside; returns to it *in order to defend* itself against it. But it is likely that this little allegory of how the trauma of modernity might be legible in a poetic text seems too neat. If trauma is a useful term of analysis it is not only by virtue of the formal paradoxes it brings to light—the return to and defense against the missed encounter. Trauma also signifies something about that "outside," something we might want to dignify with the word history. To be sure, there is an historical level to the story of Poe's composition of "The Bells." Poe's great 20th-century editor, T.O. Mabbott, in fact, took out a map of lower Manhattan circa 1849 to see which church bells Poe might have heard from Mary Louise's place on Bond Street (1: 430). But such an approach might seem too empiricist, "old historicist" to modern critical sensibilities: it would, in any case, divest the bells bothering Poe of anything remotely "traumatic." But here we might stick to our hunch by introducing a no doubt slippery distinction between "reality" and "the real," one derived from Lacan's discussion of trauma. In the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, Lacan puzzles out the behavior associated with trauma: his central example concerns the interpretation of a dream reported by Freud at the beginning of the seventh chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

> A father had been watching beside his child's sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child's body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours' sleep that father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: 'Father, don't you see I'm burning?'* He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child's dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them. (547-8)

Freud argues that the father dreams of his son's appearance in order to keep from waking up, to keep the son alive for a few more moments, as it were. Lacan thinks, on the contrary, that the father wakes up in order to be released from the trauma at the heart of the dream. The crucial distinction for our purposes is the status of the outside impingement, what Lacan calls the "accident, the noise, the small element of reality" (60): the burning candle, the smoke, all that is transpiring in the next room as the Father sleeps and dreams. This little piece of impinging reality in fact resonates with, re-evokes or re-lights, the most painful "reality in abeyance" inside the Father's unconscious—namely, the collection of feelings, motives and ignorances surrounding the son's death, that other, earlier "burning up" of the son for which the Father will always feel guilty because he could never have anticipated, no matter how much he tried, its eventuality: the son's death, in its overwhelming traumatic nature, always arrives out of time, will always have been a "missed encounter." Lacan's reading of the dream

suggests that trauma involves a kind of temporal resonance between the real and reality: between an outside that is always missed, that remains forever latent, "in abeyance, awaiting attention, *en souffrance*," and the reality which is the object of our representations. The father wakes up in order to break out of the agonizing resonance set up between the real of the trauma of his son's death and the reality of what is happening in the next room which, as Lacan remarks, can only be experienced by the father as a great relief: here at least is something against which one can take steps (59)!

Lacan's interpretation of the dream suggests, then, another dimension of the model of trauma: namely, the fact that the repetitions involved, the compulsive return to the missed encounter, can be understood as involving a species of resonance between reality—the present impingement, the locatable contingency—and the real, a temporally syncopated reality that lies outside the reach of conscious representation but not of unconscious memory and desire. Such a model might allow us to see T. O. Mabbott in the role of the dreaming father, taking up his map of Manhattan as a way of protecting himself against the traumatic resonance set up in Poe's poem. Historicism's drive for an adequate representation of reality might be a way to ignore the real in abeyance defended against in just such representations.

It seems to me not outlandish to suggest that it is to just these issues that "new historicism" aims to address itself. When new historicism attends to the marginal, the anecdotal, the repressed, it is trying to be faithful to an older ideal of historicism while also allowing that the "history" that is recorded in texts is more interesting when it is *not* represented there, when it cannot be so represented, when it is repressed or transposed. In other words, new historicism aims to straddle the distinction between a reality finding representation, and a real in partial resonance with that reality, "in abeyance, and awaiting attention." New historicism, then, operates with an idea of history and representation much more in keeping with the model of trauma I've been developing than does Mabbott. New historicism is thus also likely to think of trauma as less a representable event than a kind of pervasive condition attending and determining the representation of events. In American cultural studies at present, the main contender for such an historical trauma is the institution of race slavery in all its immense effects, and a look at some of this work takes us back to Poe.

In her powerful essay on American literary history "Playing in the Dark," Toni Morrison claims at one point that "[n]o early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe" (32). She makes this claim having just invoked the bizarre conclusion to Poe's only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, in which the white characters' terrifying descent to the South Pole takes them through regions of darkness, and a narrow escape from the fierce black savages on the Island of Tsalal. Here, at the end of their journey, their sole Tsalalian captive, Nu-Nu, dies just as—and here I quote the conclusion—"we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin was of the perfect whiteness of the snow." Morrison takes this moment as paradigmatic for a general relation in American literature

between the white imagination and the "dark and abiding presence" (46) of Africans; this is why she can say Poe is central to the concept and argument she is developing. The "shrouded human figure" is the prime example for Morrison of the "figurations of impenetrable whiteness that surface in American literature whenever an Africanist presence is engaged." Such figures "clamor...for an attention that would yield the meaning that lies in their positioning, their repetition, and their strong suggestion of paralysis and incoherence; of impasse and non-sequitur" (33). It is certainly true that the conclusion of *Pym* is rather confusing: with an expired Nu-Nu in their boat, Pym and Peters seem at once to speed up and come to a standstill, since their rush into the "embraces of a cataract" is also a rush into the obstructing presence of a shrouded white figure. In the most abstract sense, then, the conclusion to Pym reminds us of the structure of traumatic repetition, as we have seen it in "The Bells": incessant return to obstruction and impasse—paralysis in motion.

Morrison's claim about Poe's centrality goes beyond this famous conclusion to *Pym*, however; and it would seem to need to, since—with the exception of the racist fantasies about Tsalal—there aren't very many black people in Poe. Perhaps the greatest strength of Morrison's argument, though, is that African people do not need to be represented as such to be powerfully determining. Like the unwelcomeness of the son's death, blacks might be seen to operate in the "real" of a text's background more than in the "reality" of its foreground representations. Indeed, the excision of blacks from American literature , or their reduction to anecdotal, merely marginal roles—"serviceable" is Morrison's bitterly apt characterization of standard representation of blacks—can be understood as a species of defense against the traumatic presence of enslaved Africans everywhere in the culture. Joan Dayan, in her essay, "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves," has produced a brilliant extension of Morrison's basic strategy. In an exemplary new historicist maneuver, she asks: "How can we begin to think about those who have left no written records but were a constant presence, whose existence, though distorted and erased, informed Poe's unique brand of Gothic narrative in ways that have been ignored?" (203). She argues that one place to read the "real" of slavery in Poe is in his representations of the idealized, white woman. This is because the hierarchizing imagination of the white male understood both slaves and women in terms of possession; both were subject to what Poe called, in a review dealing precisely with slavery, the "language of affectionate appropriation" (182). The dilemma presented the hierarchizing mind, however, was what Dayan calls the "reversibility of supremacy," a kind of mutual convertibility between dominant and subordinate most readily dramatized in the idiom of romantic love favored by Poe. Dayan speaks of Poe's tendency to make "convertible love and possession" (185, 182). We might remark, in passing, that the way in which, to quote Dayan once more, "the law of the heart remains inseparable from the fact of property" (191) should not be imagined to apply only to those more or less precariously perched at the top of the hierarchy. Morrison's own *Beloved* can be read as an anatomy of the effects of this linkage on those denied the power to possess or to love: think of the scene in the middle of the novel in which Stamp Paid approaches the house in which Sethe, Denver and Beloved have entered into a kind of identity meltdown of desire, possession, and jealousy: all Stamp can make out from the wash of unearthly

voices is the word "Mine."

*Beloved* is of course a Gothic novel in its way: it is about people who are "possessed" in several ways at once. Morrison faces the "fact of slavery" head on, while Poe deflects it. But both writers avail themselves of Gothic conventions in order to explore forms of repetition and trauma brought on by the "language of affectionate appropriation," of what could be called the symbiotic antagonism between property and affect. For Poe, this antagonism leads to depictions of the kind of psychic paralysis figured at the close of *Pym*: "Poe is preoccupied with repeated and varied postures of enfeeblement, a deliberate weakness that leaves only feeling, an obsession with the heart that links the white male writer, the white woman of his dreams, and the ungendered, unmentioned black" (189). Dayan wants to understand Poe's obsessive return to moments of "enfeeblement," when the nominally entitled author or narrator undergoes a species of dis-possession, as evincing a critical posture towards his culture's "idiom of power" (Orlando Patterson's phrase, cited by Dayan 198). This may be true, though I think such a critical posture is not, if I can use this expression, exactly "owned" by Poe. I want to return to my argument about traumatic repetition in suggesting that what Poe returns to so regularly is beyond either the pleasure or the reality principles, beyond anything that could be owned by Poe in a subjectively coherent fashion. What he returns to are dramas of affect—a "weakness that leaves only feeling" after the collapse or volatilization of the cognitively secured value distinctions supporting social hierarchies. To return obsessively to such scenes of paralyzed intensity of feeling and cognitive breakdown suggests that the traumatic "missed encounter" in Poe's work is less a punctual event that a generalized condition in which a psychosocial structure of distinctions cannot adequately manage or program the feeling or affect subtending that structure. Affect here would be associated with an obstacle to meaning, but in the mode of an overdetermination of meaning rather than its lack. The trauma Poe's work is determined by, I am suggesting, is that of a culture which to a very great degree requires identity at once to emerge from and become entirely distinct from affective identification; it is a culture that demands that cognitive and social self-possession emerge from affectionate dispossession, a culture, in sum, that simultaneously aggrandizes affect and defends itself furiously against it.

As with modernity and the contingent outside, Poe's obsessive return to states of affective undoing, then, is undertaken as a paradoxical seeking out of that which must be defended against. With this in mind, we can return to the story of the composition of "The Bells" and begin to fill in a more plausible account of the way the ringing of the bells might have triggered an access of programming. Recall that Mary Louise Shew Houghton had originally provided the first "programming" of the irritating bells by writing the title "The Bells" and the first lines of several stanzas. If the ringing bells are part of the contingent outside in need of incorporation and programming, then, the same might be said of Mary Louise. Indeed, when we recall what Poe said—"I have to write a poem; I have no feeling, no sentiment, no inspiration"; and "I so dislike the sound of bells tonight, I cannot write. I have no subject—I am exhausted."—we might begin to suspect that what he calls here "having no

feeling, no sentiment, no inspiration," is closer to having *too much* feeling rather than not enough. In a poem written shortly before to Mary Louise, titled simply "To—", Poe had sketched a scene not so different from what he experiences in her apartment during the composition of the first drafts of "The Bells" (the passage is discussed by Dayan as well):

> . . . my spells are broken.
> The pen falls powerless from my shivering hand.
> With thy dear name as text, though bidden by thee,
> I cannot write—I cannot speak or think,
> Alas, I cannot feel; for 'tis not feeling,
> This standing motionless upon the golden
> Threshold of the wide-open gate of dreams,
> Gazing, entranced, adown the gorgeous vista,
> And thrilling as I see upon the right,
> Upon the left, and all the way along
> Amid empurpled vapors, far away
> To where the prospect terminates—*thee only*. (1: 407-8)

What interests me here is the combination of a species of compulsion—"I have to write a poem," am "bidden by thee"—and the way in which the very invitation to poetizing—here the muse-like Mary Louise, or at least her "name as text"—becomes an obstruction to such compulsion. The state Poe finds himself in is, as I have suggested, not a lack of feeling but an overwhelming by feeling, a kind of wildly vibratory paralysis in which the poles of active and passive are entirely confused. Dayan speaks of a "willed passivity" and of Poe's "feeling summoning dissolution" (186). I would qualify the state described here—and essentially reproduced in Mary Louise's apartment later—as a state of "suspension." It is this state which, for Poe, constitutes the traumatic condition which both compels and undoes his aesthetic strategies of containment and defense. It is this condition, exacerbated by the obstructing allure of Mary Louise herself, that Poe reproduces on Bond Street, and for which the ringing of the bells becomes the "small element of reality" seized upon as something to work on, to represent, much as the burning candle in the next room is awakened to as an at least representable reality, painful and insistent, to be sure, but preferable to the "real" traumatism that exceeds representation and consists of a kind of suspended dissolve into contradictory affect.

The bells, then, both in downtown Manhattan, and in the poem we have been given by Mary Louise Shew Houghton and Poe, are "allegories of affect," standing in not for a traumatic event but rather for a condition that must always be missed, because it suspends the normativizing representations it solicits. But such an allegory of affect must necessarily also signify the aesthetic containment and reduction of such an overwhelming condition: it both signals something profound and sublime, and does so with an insistence which shadows the sublime with the bathetic: affect can *only be* allegorized, and it can only be allegorized—in the conditions of modernity in which Poe works and in which we still live—as betraying something of what Lyotard called the "*petit frisson*," the "cheap thrill." Modernity aggrandizes affect, the sublime, the new, but can only do so in the mode of its techno-scientific reduction. One of the reasons Poe is significant and deprecated, "dubious and inevitable," is that he displays the way in which aesthetic strategies are part and parcel of such a

contradictory process. If he is a "technocrat of art," then, what he evokes via his obvious, obsessive, often meretricious allegorizing of affect is the bad faith we necessarily evince vis-à-vis the aesthetic. It remains unclear, I would suggest, whether Poe is more unsettling for so relentlessly attempting to formalize effects, to program affects, or for exhibiting the inevitable failure of such a technocratic compulsion. The question we'd rather not pose to ourselves is, which is worse?—that the aesthetic is but one mode of techno-scientific programming, one dedicated especially to handling unregulated affective states, or that it fails in the end to so handle them?

But I have drifted away from the way Poe handles trauma to the issues with which I began this talk, namely the trauma Poe may still constitute for us today. I have moved, that is, from how Poe dealt with some bells to how *we* deal with his jingliness. I want to conclude by revisiting another jingly site in Poe, one that has always been for me one of the most effective conjunctions of trauma and affect. I want to propose that we take the narrator of Poe's late tale "The Cask of Amontillado" as a figure for Poe himself as obsessive aesthetic programmer. Like many of his pathological narrators, Montresor prides himself on the method and beauty of his "plot" to revenge himself on Fortunato. And indeed, it all works very well. He lures Fortunato, drunk, into the catacombs with the promise of some Amontillado, chains him to the wall and bricks him up. Fortunato is an irritant to be contained, in other words. For fifty years, Montresor tells us in conclusion, no one has discovered the crime to which he is now, as it were, confessing.

This confession itself, however, should give us pause. Montresor gives no real indication of why he feels the need to confess—indeed he stresses early on that the perfect revenge must be known only by the victim, and undiscovered by everyone else. We also do not know to whom he is ostensibly telling the story—the interlocutor is characterized only as "You—who know so well the nature of my soul" (3: 1256). When placed in the series of compulsively confessing narrators we get in "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "The Imp of the Perverse," etc., we can see Montresor as driven by a need to communicate that exceeds—indeed undoes—the perfection of his plot, his program of extermination. What is the meaning of this? Everything about the tale exhibits the "convertibility" discussed by Dayan: Fortunato and Montresor are quite obviously doubles of one another. *Fortuna*to's bad *fortune* is Mon*tresor*'s private *treasure*: each character's name at once echoes and ironizes the other's. Montresor's family coat of arms drives home the point: "A huge human foot d'or, in a field of azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel" (3: 1259) (see Cohen for a thoroughgoing analysis of these motifs). The dialogue throughout exhibits a species of echoing stychomythia that serves to reinforce the identity of the two characters. Indeed, as Fortunato begins to awaken to his situation, he begins to yell, hoping apparently to rouse a third party to come to his aid: Montresor's chilling reply—"I re-echoed, I aided, I surpassed [his yells] in volume and in strength"(3: 1262)—serves both to emphasize the absoluteness of the doubles' separation from larger society, and to illustrate how Montresor experiences his identity with Fortunato in the mode of contest, containment, "surpassing," in his word. This then would seem to be the point:

the tale describes how what goes around comes around, how despite Montresor's pathological attempt to assert a primacy over and against his fellow man, he too will in turn see the tables turned—a reversal of fortune apparently embodied in the confession.

And yet this seems a little too pat, to my mind. One doesn't get the sense that Montresor is, or even will be, receiving his just deserts. Something more complicated is happening. Recall the setting: it is the "supreme madness of the carnival season," and Fortunato is in motley: "He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells" (3: 1257). It is, in other words, a moment of aesthetic play, in which normal social hierarchies are not in force. It is in this suspended environment that Montresor pursues his rather more serious aesthetic plot. But he is unable fully to contain the aesthetic suspension that enables his domination of Fortunato. The one moment in the tale when we palpably feel Montresor lying to himself is at the very end, when Fortunato ceases to respond:

> "Fortunato!"
> No answer. I called again—
> "Fortunato!"
> No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick—on account of the dampness of the catacombs. I hastened to make an end of my labor. I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I r-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace requiescat*! (3: 1263)

It is clearly not the "dampness of the catacombs" that makes Montresor's heart grow sick. It is that Fortunato's "last word"—a mere "jingling of the bells"—is quite simply uncontainable by the furious encrypting of meaning Montresor pursues. Montresor tells us his story, undoes the perfection of his plot, in order to return to this moment of the jingling of the bells, return to it to defend himself against it. The "real" trauma of the jingling of the bells cannot be represented (hence Montresor's desperate recourse to the representable reality of the dampness of the catacombs). The message of the bells cannot be cognized, cannot be successfully ordered. The bells allegorize, rather, the suspension of such ordering, the suspension that makes the inversions of carnival possible, and the convertibility of Montresor and Fortunato more durable than Montresor's attempt to block that conversion.

For many years I have been returning compulsively to the jingling of the bells, for it is a site of intense pleasure for me, albeit a pleasure about which I don't know how to feel. Is it an aesthetic pleasure? Is it a traumatic "pleasure"? Is this pathetic tinkling a "*petit frisson*," a "cheap thrill," or is it the testimony of the irrecuperabilty of the new of an event? It is certainly a "normal disturbance of norms." I can't get it out of my head that it's not, after all, Montresor who figures Poe for us, but rather Fortunato. I see his unavowable pleasure in the course of events. I can just make out his smiling teeth in the gloom of the crypt. A tiny shake of the head as we place the last brick in. The jingle man.

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# To the Strange Red Earth: Anagogy and Descent in Flannery O' Connor's South

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> I came home to Georgia, my foreign birthplace,
> home to the strange red earth, the tall, unbranching pines.
>
> -- from 'Homecoming' by Tracy Mishkin

> Down there [in the South] a poet is almost as rare as an oboe player, a dry-point etcher or a metaphysician.
>
> -- H. L. Mencken (1919)

*Introducing Flannery O'Connor and anagogy*

"Literary Witch", "Austere Angel", "Evil-hunter", "Hillbilly Thomist", "Medievalist from Milledgeville"[1] -- these are some of the more catchy (or tacky) names that Southern-born Flannery O'Connor has been designated over the years by an assortment of critics. In varying tones of candour or shades of allusion, they draw attention to O'Connor's distinctive, even disturbing, affinity with the medieval milieu.

When interrogating Flannery O'Connor's outlook and literary approach, both religion and region are crucial to consider. Points of meeting, unexpected junctions in her imagination, seem to exist between her Catholic belief[2] and her 'Southerness'. Of course, conspicuous synapses exist also. As James Andreas (1989) and Anthony Di Renzo (1993) astutely suggest, however, it is through an espousal of medieval perspectives and energies that O'Connor attempts to strengthen the connections between her outward and inward spheres; to find her place in the world as a writer. She adopts Joseph Conrad's terms: "to find the terms of [her] appeal" (*Mystery and Manners*, hereafter *MM*, 196).

Catholicism is, of course, deeply anchored in Western medieval thought. The American South as a region, though not linked historically to a medieval past, in an unanticipated sense, shares a perceptual kinship with medieval existence. "[I]n the South", according to O'Connor, "the general conception of the whole man is still, in the main, theological" (*MM*: 44): an understanding of identity that is decidedly 'medieval'. As a result, she has the "greatest possible advantage" (as a Catholic writer in the South) because here "belief can still be made believable, even if for the modern mind, it can't be made admirable" (*MM*: 203).

Documentation of O'Connor's attention to medieval theology, philosophy and aesthetics is easily handled from a cursory look at her lectures, letters and book reviews; published in respective collections, namely: *Mystery and Manners* (1969), *The Habit of Being* (1979) and *The Presence of Grace* (1983). This paper aims to explore one dimension of Flannery O'Connor's 'medieval vision', that of *anagogy*, in which she expresses a particular interest.